

Reflection on the Word: September 2, 2018

James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

While off on Study Leave, I spent some time preparing ahead for Sundays in September, but I also took a few hours for more leisurely reading. One book I read was set in the context of football, and focused on the story of one "big star" football player who had become obsessed with fame, fortune, and the social life that went with it. But when challenged by another player to spend some volunteer time with an organization that works with foster children, his heart is opened and he comes to the realization that it isn't the fame and fortune of what he does in front of eighty thousand people at a Sunday game that most meaningfully defines who he is ... It is what he does and how he lives Monday through Saturday, when the fans aren't watching, that would most truly define his legacy.

Just as going to church on Sunday does not necessarily define who we are or how others see us, that football player discovered that being a star is about more than the game; it's about life and how we live it. It's about the opportunities we all have – to make a difference – as we live our lives between Sundays.

When we turn to today's scripture readings, we hear a similar message.

The epistle reading from James is a New Testament wisdom passage. A wise teacher is writing to an early Christian community about faith, about living in the presence of God through the ways of Christ. As Moses, thousands of years before, had told the people to stay true to the commandments God had given to them, this teacher reminds the people that "every good action and every perfect gift is from God..." And he's telling them: "Do not dabble in faith, just hearing the teachings but not taking them to heart. But let the teaching of God, through Christ, change your heart and in so doing, influence your actions in the world. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in the 19th century, "Go put your creed into your deed." And as James puts it: "Be doers of the word, and not just hearers."

In the gospel lesson from Mark, Jesus is asserting the same principles. When his disciples are criticized by the Pharisees for not following the rules for handwashing, which are among the many religious purity laws, Jesus quotes the ancient prophet, Isaiah. "This people shows honor to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts or rules as doctrines."

Jesus has no patience with those who honor the trappings of religion above the essence of God's teachings. He tells the Pharisees that nothing from outside the bodies can defile or make a person unclean. People are made unclean by the things that come out of them. Jesus is saying that it is the religion of the heart, steeped in the ways of God, that makes the difference in who we are and how

we act in the world. If our outside actions do not reflect what is in our hearts then they are worthless.

Of course, it's not always easy to live what we believe, to speak our truth, to be willing to bring forth in our words and our actions what is in our hearts. It's a given that from time to time we will fail to live faithfully to that which we profess and we will require both God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of those whom we may hurt or ignore.

Living in God's presence and choosing the ways of God in our daily living requires practice. James says ... Be patient. Be slow to anger. Be honest with yourself, with God, and with others. And watch what you say. It is simple, yet somehow profound, advice.

We are reminded, also, that the way of God calls us to seek the welfare of widows, orphans, & strangers, to shed possessions that possess us, to free ourselves from the world's evil influence, and, as Jesus would say, to store up treasures in heaven.

In our moment by moment, day to day practice of faith, in our Monday to Saturday, as well as our Sunday lives, as we utilize our gifts in God's service, we need to be aware of how we allow the love that God has planted in our hearts to be lived and expressed in our actions and our words... As one person put it: If your creed is standing in the way of your doing a good deed then examine the creed. It might be killing your compassion.

As a way of reflecting on all this, let me share a story: It's of a child named Teddy and an elementary teacher whose name was Mrs. Thompson. As she stood in front of her fifth grade class on the very first day of school, she told the children a lie. Like most teachers, she looked at her students and said that she loved them all the same. But that was impossible, because there in the front row, slumped in his seat, was a boy named Teddy Stoddard.

Mrs. Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he didn't play well with the other children, that his clothes were messy and he constantly needed a bath. His attitude was poor, and his school work was not up to standard – Mrs. Thompson was not looking forward to being Teddy's teacher.

It was policy at the school where she taught, that after a month or two of the first semester, all teachers were required to review each child's past records. When Mrs. Thompson reviewed Teddy's file, she was in for a surprise. Teddy's first grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He does his work neatly and has good manners...he is a joy to be around."

His second grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student, well-liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle."

His third grade teacher wrote, "His mother's death has been hard on Teddy. He tries to do his best but his father doesn't show much interest and his home life will soon affect him if some steps aren't taken."

Teddy's fourth grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. He doesn't have many friends and sometimes sleeps in class."

By now, Mrs. Thompson realized the problem and was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents, wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright paper, except for Teddy's. His present was clumsily wrapped in the heavy, brown paper that he got from a grocery bag. Mrs. Thompson took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents. Some of the children started to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing and a nearly empty bottle of perfume. But she stifled the children's laughter when she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was. She put it on and dabbed some of the perfume on her wrist.

Teddy Stoddard stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my mom used to." After the children left she cried for at least an hour. On that very day, she quit teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. Instead, she began to teach children.

Mrs. Thompson paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with him, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in the class and, despite her lie that she would love all the children the same, Teddy became her favorite. A year later, she found a note under her door, from Teddy, telling her that she was the best teacher he ever had in his whole life.

Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy. He then wrote that he had finished high school, third in his class, and she was still the best teacher he ever had in his whole life. Four years after that, she got another letter,

saying that while things had been tough at times, he stayed in school, had stuck with it, and would soon graduate from university with honors. He assured Mrs. Thompson that she was still the best and favorite teacher he ever had in his whole life. Then four more years passed and yet another letter came. This time he explained that after he got his bachelor's degree, he decided to go a little further. The letter explained that she was still his best and favorite teacher. But now his name was a little longer. The letter was signed, Theodore F. Stoddard, MD.

The story doesn't end there. You see, there was yet another letter later that summer. Teddy said he'd met a girl and was going to be married, and he was wondering if Mrs. Thompson might agree to sit in the place at the wedding that was usually reserved for the mother of the groom.

Of course, Mrs. Thompson did. And guess what? She wore that bracelet, the one with several rhinestones missing. And she made sure she was wearing the perfume that Teddy remembered his mother wearing on their last Christmas together. They hugged each other, and Dr. Teddy Stoddard whispered in Mrs. Thompson's ear, "Thank you, Mrs. Thompson, for believing in me. Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference." Mrs. Thompson, with tears in her eyes, whispered back. She said, "Teddy, you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you."

Today, may we say to Jesus – I didn't know how to live until I met you. And may all the love that he has poured into our hearts, shine forth in our words and our actions so that we might truly live the faith we profess. Amen.